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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 003194

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [IR](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: SYRIAN INFLUENCE GROWING WITH REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENTS?

REF: DAMASCUS 1913

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: The SARG sees its influence growing in light of regional developments, including the recent kidnapping of an Israeli soldier, the June 28 Israeli overflight of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's summer home, and Asad's separate June 28 meetings in Damascus with visiting Lebanese Parliament Speaker and the Jordanian PM, according to Syrian foreign policy analyst Dr. Imad Shuebi, who maintains close ties to the regime. Shuebi's tone and comments throughout the conversation seemed designed to give the impression of a SARG confident about its regional and international influence and about its own survival. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Poloff met June 29 with Syrian foreign policy analyst Dr. Imad Shuebi to discuss regional developments, including the recent kidnapping of an Israeli soldier, the June 28 Israeli overflight of the Syrian President's summer home, and Asad's separate June 28 meetings with visiting Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri and the visiting Jordanian PM, the ongoing meeting of the Higher Joint Syrian-Jordanian Committee, as well as jailed human rights and civil society activists.

¶3. (C) PALESTINIAN-ISRAEL CONFLICT: Shuebi noted with pride the response by Syrian air defenses to the overflight by Israeli warplanes, noting that it was the first time in recent history that the SARG had responded with force. The SARG has always sought to convince Damascus-based Hamas leader Khalid Mish'al of the importance of finding a peaceful solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, said Shuebi, who qualified his statement by recounting a chance meeting with Mish'al five days ago at a wake. Mish'al said that he was willing to recognize Israel, if Tel Aviv would in turn recognize a Palestinian state, Shuebi said. When pressed as to whether Mish'al would intervene to obtain the Israeli soldier's release, Shuebi denied Hamas' role in the kidnapping, instead laying the blame on a group connected to Fatah. (Note: Syrian state television earlier cited an unnamed Ministry of Information official as saying that the Damascus-based Hamas leadership could not possibly have carried out the kidnapping from Syria "by remote control.")

¶4. (C) JORDAN: Shuebi characterized Asad's June 28 meeting with Jordanian PM Marouf al-Bakhit, as well as the ongoing meeting of the Higher Joint Syrian-Jordanian Committee, as part of an effort to improve bilateral political relations, which have been deteriorating since March (reftel). One sign of those deteriorating relations, according to Shuebi, was

Jordan's arming of Al-Qaida militants who on June 2 attacked Syria's Radio and Television building. (Comment: Shuebi's comments on the role of Jordan and al-Qaida in the incident go far beyond what the SARG has publicly said to date about the shoot-out. End comment.) The official Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported that Bakhit handed Asad a letter from Jordan's King Abdullah II, and the two men discussed developments in the Palestinian Territories and Iraq. Other media reported that the Abdullah letter contained an invitation to Amman. The Jordanian delegation includes the ministers of foreign affairs, interior, energy and mineral resources, transportation, industry and trade, agriculture, water and irrigation, and the government spokesman, according to SANA. The joint committee's last meeting was in February 2005.

15. (C) LEBANON: Shuebi asserted that Berri made his surprise June 28 visit to Damascus to set up a meeting between Asad and "a very important Lebanese leader," which will occur "within days unless a certain other country intervenes." (Comment: We presume Shuebi was referring to Lebanese PM Fouad Siniora and the U.S.) Shuebi's voice took on a gloating note as he suggested that Syria's influence in Lebanon had only grown since the withdrawal in early 2004 of Syrian troops. "One Western diplomat asked me why Syria didn't just overthrow the Lebanese government, but I responded that now wasn't the right time," Shuebi said. The USG needed to understand that Lebanon was merely an arena for political actors, including Iran, the U.S. and Syria, Shuebi said. It was, in fact, not in the USG's interest for Damascus to establish formal diplomatic relations with Beirut because the Syrian Ambassador would wield enormous power, similar to that of Syria's former chiefs of military intelligence in Lebanon, Ghazi Kanaan and Rustom Ghazaleh,

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Shuebi stated.

16. (C) HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY: The SARG will show no mercy to jailed activists, particularly those who continued to stand by their signature of the Damascus-Beirut Declaration (DBD), which had clearly crossed Syrian red lines in its solidarity with Lebanon's March 14 forces, Shuebi said. Of the 10 jailed activists who signed the DBD, only human rights lawyer Anwar Bunni and Syrian intellectual Michel Kilo remain firm in their commitment to the document, despite pressure from the eight other jailed signatories, Shuebi said. Kilo would likely face at least a 10-year sentence for signing the document, claimed Shuebi, mockingly adding that the SARG would reduce the activist to "a quarter-Kilo."

17. (C) REGIONAL INFLUENCE AND REGIME SURVIVAL: Throughout the conversation, Shuebi repeatedly asserted an inextricable link between the country's strength as a regional player and the regime's survival. He characterized USG demands for unconditional Syrian cooperation, including in Iraq and with Palestinian factions, as naive and inflammatory, claiming that the USG must treat the SARG as an equal partner if it hopes to resolve regional conflicts.

18. (C) Comment: Shuebi's tone and comments seemed designed to give the impression of a SARG confident about its regional and international influence and about its own survival. Western diplomats have separately claimed that the SARG is satisfied that events in Israel and the Palestinian Territories have spurred phone calls to Asad from the likes of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and UNSYG Kofi Annan, confirming Damascus' centrality to the resolution of regional crises.
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